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The Shame in Privilege

Privilege. When I was younger, I had a positive connotation of this word. I was privileged to have clean clothes to wear every day. I was privileged to go to school and receive an education. I was privileged to always have food to eat when I was hungry. This privilege exuded gratitude. However, as I aged, the concept of privilege changed. Privilege became a deplorable concept: it became an idea that, within middle-class America, my accomplishments were deemed lesser because I had advantages. The simplest aspects of my life, like the ability to walk outside without fear or that I was born in a developed country, signaled my unfair advantage over others. Somehow, at a time unbeknownst to me, I was placed in the midst of a societal hierarchy. My privilege elevated me above others who did not have any. Perhaps the change that this word “privilege” underwent was simply the result of my own epiphany; perhaps it was a concept that had been present my entire life, but was just waiting for me to stumble upon it. Or, perhaps, the world aged with me and the idea that a person had an advantage in life that had little to do with what he or she deserved became resoundingly unfair: now people felt the need to speak against it. No matter how it came about, with my recognition of it, privilege changed from having a positive connotation to being doused in shame. Suddenly, I was forced to evaluate my position in the hierarchy of society. I had to consider whether it would be my role to embrace the placement, to reject the shame that comes with privilege because it was not of my own doing. I also had to consider if, instead, it would become my responsibility to accept the shame, to perpetuate change for the people who are unable to enact it for themselves. My personal debate of individual privilege, responsibility for others, and the connection with shame is paralleled in the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), where author Kazuo Ishiguro exposes the flaws of a hierarchical society through an exploration of the affect of shame.

Affect theory has become more widely accepted “in the last decade” with scholars in the humanities and social sciences having “witnessed an affective and emotional turn,” a shift from the singular focus on language and linguistic structures (Callard 247). Affect is different from emotion since it “refers to an amorphous, diffuse, and bodily ‘experience’ of stimulation impinging upon and altering the body’s physiology” (Callard 247). Therefore, Affect Theory analyzes how the body experiences and reacts to different instances within a person or group of people. In “Writing Shame,” Elspeth Probyn, a Gender and Cultural Studies professor at the University of Sydney, considers the relationship between shame and writing, which is featured in *The Affect Theory Reader*. In Probyn’s chapter, she examines shame in relation to writing, with shame as “a painful thing to write about” because it is “an exposure of the intimacies of selves in public” (Probyn 72). Shame is the exposing of a phantom that may or may not be a result of a person’s actions; rather, this hidden or suppressed secret may be beyond a person’s control. Shame is an all-consuming experience that “means suspecting everything you are and do and feel” (Connor 219). Shame envelopes the body in such a way that shame and the body become inseparable. This steeping of shame into the body is the result of “a collision of bodies, history, and place” (Probyn 82). It is only through the recognition of shame that a person can tolerate it. The moment that people are able to admit their shame, they “break free of shame’s suffocating clasp and start puffing on the pungent insufflation of imposture” (Connor 212). Even though people do not choose shame, it comes in and refuses to leave, and the harder they try to rid themselves of it, the more it holds on to whatever is within its grasp. However, while shame is an unpleasant experience, it is part of being human: shame is a key element of life (Connor 228-229). Shame reveals humanity and, without it, people cannot be fully human.

In the novel *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro establishes an alternate world that explores the cultural controversy of cloning and the moral issues that arise. “[A]fter the war, in the early fifties” England, Ishiguro presents the idea of cloning as a way to cure diseases (Ishiguro 262). The humans within the public sphere, the everyday citizens who had no interaction with the clones, sought clones to make sure “their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease” (263). These cures were made possible because the clones’ role in society was to live until their late twenties, and then, over the course of one to four surgeries, their organs were harvested until they died. The general public chose to be ignorant about where the organs were coming from and people preferred “to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum” (262). Due to the moral issues that coincide cloning human beings and harvesting their organs, the clones “were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about [them]” (263). The novel focuses on the character Kathy, who is a clone, and follows her upbringing in a special school named Hailsham, one of the schools for privileged clones. As children, the clones are desensitized to the idea of giving their life through organ donation. However, as the time to donate and die nears, the clones realize that they want to have the freedom to live longer so they can love each other. This additional time for life is denied to them because, though they may look, sound, and love like humans, the clones are considered to be less-than-human. After all, they were not born. They were merely created in laboratories.

Hiding the secret of cloning and forced organ donation within this society leads to shame across diverse classifications of characters. An adaptation of Elspeth Probyn's discussion of the “shame-induced ethics of writing” facilitates an analysis of the shame perpetuated in hierarchical structures of the fictional society (89). In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters maintain their position

within the hierarchy because of their origin. Due to the origins of the characters, the power positions are fixed and cannot be shifted, regardless of the achievements or desires of the characters. Power through position is given to the characters, which evokes the feeling of shame in certain characters because of the resulting undeserved and unwanted power. Across the strata of society, the characters see privilege as an unfair advantage with many of the characters envying the lives of others. However, the society of *Never Let Me Go* instates a caste system: the clones are considered to be inferior to the naturally born people.

Because of the position of privilege, characters can only envy others who are placed in a higher position of the hierarchy: clones, as the lowest members of the caste, are not envied, unless they remain without shame in an undeserved position of power. The characters within the novel mimic traditional gender hierarchies, where women are inferior and are only envied for “the fact of their not being men” (Connor 214). Therefore, in this context, the only apparent way a man could envy a woman is in his avoidance of shame that comes with being a man in a position of privilege. This idea is paralleled in the structure of the hierarchy established in *Never Let Me Go*. Within this text, the hierarchy is structured with the non-Hailsham clones as the lowest strata, having an abysmal childhood and little say in the choices they have to make in their lives. Next are the Hailsham clones, who had a relatively happy upbringing, but still have extremely limited choice in how they live. The next strata above the Hailsham clones are the guardians, the people who interacted with the clones and had the ability to choose their own destiny, but yet were limited in their influence over the clones. Finally, the characters placed in the superior position are the general public, who wield an immense amount of power in the lives of the clones, but who choose to remain ignorant about the function and nature of the clones.

Throughout the text, the shame of privilege is evident within this hierarchy. Each group views the social caste below them with shame.

The introductory chapter introduces the shame of the Hailsham clones. The main character, Kathy H., is a thirty-one-year-old woman who grew up at Hailsham and now works as a carer. Kathy's first acknowledged privilege is her ability "to pick and choose" the people that she cares for (Ishiguro 4). However, Kathy thinks that she deserves this privilege because her donors "have always tended to do much better than expected" (3). Kathy recognizes the special treatment and justifies it as a result of her superiority as a carer. Kathy, however, is not the only one who sees the special treatment. The other non-Hailsham clones begin to talk poorly of her and show their displeasure through their gossip. They claim that Kathy's success with patients is due to her ability to "choose her own kind: people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates" (4). This privilege, Kathy feels the need to justify to the reader, to whom she is narrating. Kathy's need to explain herself and to deny her privilege shows the shame that she is experiencing. She directly addresses the gossip about her and explains:

But I'm not the first to be allowed to pick and choose, and I doubt if I'll be the last. And anyway, I've done my share of looking after donors brought up in every kind of place. By the time I finish, remember, I'll have done twelve years of this, and it's only the last six they've let me choose. (4)

By bringing up these points to justify herself, Kathy shows her defensiveness and insecurity. Her reaction exposes the deeply hidden shame of her privilege because, if she felt that her privilege was truly deserved, she would not have become defensive towards the gossip. This is highlighted with the wording that Kathy uses. She begins with the word "but," which indicates that she is defending herself against the accusations. Later in this text, she says, "and anyway, I've done my

share (4).” Kathy feels the need to justify herself and show that she deserves the privilege that she is receiving. This is reflected in her urging of the reader to “remember, [she has] done twelve years of this, and it’s only the last six they’ve let me choose (4)”. In this sentence, Kathy attempts to establish that the privilege is earned, even though she has not done anything to deserve it. Without shame, Kathy would not have felt the need to address the rumors said about her.

One could argue that it is not shame that Kathy feels, but that it is, instead, guilt. However, guilt functions differently than shame. “Guilt is referential, and transitive: *I did it*” while “shame is intransitive, so that its subject is the bearer of it, not its cause: *Shame is on you.*” (Connor 218). Kathy did not grant herself the privilege of choosing her donors; a superior gives Kathy this opportunity. She does not even directly influence the reasoning behind her “promotion.” Instead, Kathy is rewarded for the recovery time of her donors, who are more medically dependent on the actions of the medical staff than the carer that visits “three or four times a week in the late afternoon” (Ishiguro 214). Due to her indirect involvement in her privilege of choosing her own patients, Kathy struggles with shame rather than guilt. Kathy does not choose her privilege: it is forced on her. She did not request or demand her ability to pick her patients, but rather is given the opportunity. The job as a carer is emotionally demanding and requires that clones watch others undergo surgery, barely recover, and then undergo surgery again. Under these conditions, Kathy's ability to choose her patients provides a much needed relief from this heartache.

However, the most important privilege that Kathy has as a Hailsham clone is not her ability to pick the donors that she works with, but is, rather, the privilege that all Hailsham clones have: their comfortable upbringings. Kathy is a carer who reflects on how she lived in Hailsham,

one of the “privileged estates.” At Hailsham, the clones were “a select few” considered students and were granted “many improvements” (263). These improvements made a significant difference in the rearing of the Hailsham clones as they were able to live a more comfortable life than the other clones. In contrast, the other clones were reared in “vast government ‘homes’” with “deplorable conditions” which, if one were to visit them, “you’d not sleep for days if you saw what still goes on in some of those places” (261, 265). In Hailsham, the students had guardians who cared for the students and treated them kindly. Non-Hailsham clones did not have the privilege of this memory of a good upbringing. During Kathy’s third year as a carer, she was assigned to a donor who had not been raised in a privileged estate. When the donor that Kathy was assigned to found out that Kathy had attended Hailsham, he constantly asked her about her childhood. When she asked him where he grew up, “his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace” (5). The donor did not want to remember his younger years; it pained him to remember. Instead of remembering his youth, “he’d ask [Kathy] about the big things and the little things” of her time at Hailsham. It was not until she had cared for him for several days that she realized that “what he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood” (5). The donor's perpetual requests for Kathy to tell stories of her youth reveal that the childhood of Hailsham students was superior to the childhood of the other clones, since the other clones desired to have memories of Hailsham as their own.

Not only do the clones have ideal childhoods on which to reflect, but the students at Hailsham were able to make “collections” of what they valued. They collected items that were brought from the community, which they were able to buy at sales with tokens that they earned from their artwork. Through the sales, the students were able to connect to the world outside of

Hailsham. It is where they acquired their “special things that hadn’t been made by another student” (41). Not only were the Hailsham students able to collect items from the outside world, but also they collected their peers’ work. Their fellow students' works were the only way to tangibly remember their friends and childhood. Although the students did not value these works as much when they were younger, as they grew older and left Hailsham to live in different areas of England, they cherished the memorabilia. The ability to select keepsakes was a privilege that the other non-Hailsham clones did not have. When Ruth and Kathy went to the Cottages, they “could see that none of the veterans had collections” (130). While this does not imply that the non-Hailsham clones did not have collections, even if they had the opportunity to keep their most valued items, they did not have a happy childhood that made non-Hailsham clones feel the need to keep memories of it. If they did not have collections, non-Hailsham clones did not have the ability to own and value something as their own. Regardless of whether non-Hailsham clones had collections, the Hailsham students were given the unrivaled privilege of having items important enough to want to keep.

While Hailsham students were privileged among the clones, they had significantly less privilege than the people who were aware of clones, but who were naturally born. The people who interacted with the clones most frequently were the guardians. The guardians were both teachers and parents to the clones, providing the clones with guidance since the clones spent the entirety of the childhood at Hailsham. The guardians were not clones themselves, but rather they were the general public who chose to help raise and guide the clones. Throughout the novel, the guardians are the higher power that the children go to when they seek understanding or need comforting. When Tommy has a tantrum because children bully him and splatter mud on his new shirt, Kathy attempts to comfort him by telling him, “If you can’t get it off yourself, just take it to

Miss Jody” (11). While the guardians are the adults in charge of the children, they are more detached than a normal parent or guardian would be. When Kathy suggests that Tommy take his shirt to Miss Jody, she recommends it as a second option. She says, “If you can’t get it off yourself” which means that Tommy should go to the guardian only as a last resort (11). Also, during the entire bullying incident, the guardians do not intervene at all. Instead, they let the other children keep picking on Tommy. “Then there were rumours almost every day of pranks that had been played on him...some of it sounded pointlessly nasty: like the time someone cleaned a toilet with his toothbrush so it was waiting for him with shit all over the bristles” (15). The guardians were always present throughout the time at Hailsham, but were always detached from the children. They did not have intimate moments like a parent or caregiver would, but rather only fulfilled the role of educator.

While the guardians did their best to help the students, they were given the ultimate privilege: the ability to choose their own fate. As non-clones, they were not created to donate their organs. Rather, they were the general public who would one day receive donated organs from the clones. However, the guardians were knowledgeable about the clones and chose to improve the lives of the clones by teaching and directing them. Throughout the novel, the guardians speak with the clones, sometimes in groups and other times one-on-one, and share what the guardians believe to be good advice. After the unceasing bullying, Tommy is pulled aside by Miss Lucy. Miss Lucy consoles Tommy about how “it was all right not to be creative” (26). She does her best to comfort Tommy. She shares that “[t]here’s at least one person here at Hailsham who believes otherwise. At least one person who believes you’re a very good student, as good as any she’s ever come across” (28). Miss Lucy sought Tommy out and gave him

comfort and guidance when he desperately needed it. After their talk, Tommy's bullying "all stopped, not overnight, but rapidly enough" (21).

Even though the guardians did their best to care for and guide the clones, the guardians still experienced shame over their own ability to live a full life in contrast to the children, who would not have the ability to do so themselves. The shame is subtle, but is seen throughout the novel. The shame of a guardian is first seen in Miss Lucy. During her talk with Tommy about how he did not need to be creative, Tommy describes Miss Lucy as "Shaking. With rage...She was furious. But furious deep inside" (28). Miss Lucy was overwhelmed with shame: shame of her privilege and the privileges of her peers. She was ashamed of her inability to fully help Tommy. She was ashamed that no matter what she did, she could not change the treatment of the students that she undoubtedly grew to care deeply about, maybe even love. The injustice of the situation festered inside of Miss Lucy and her anger became "a composite anger-shame," which is the result of when anger "breeds with shame" (Connors 215). Miss Lucy believed that the children should be made "more aware of what lay ahead of [them], who [they] were, what [they] were for" (267). Miss Lucy felt angry because in her privilege she was free, but not enough to free the clones.

Not only did the guardians have the privilege of freedom to control their own lives, but they also had the privilege of knowledge. The guardians had an extensive understanding of the predetermined fate of Hailsham students. As guardians, they had the privilege of controlling the minds of the students, but were not controlled themselves. Miss Emily, the head of the guardians, felt keeping the students unaware of their fate was merciful. She saw the children's ignorance as providing them shelter from their inevitable fate. She defends her choice to hide the truth of the clones' fate by telling Kathy and Tommy, "in many ways we fooled you...But we sheltered you

during those years, and we gave you your childhoods” (268). Her defensiveness shows her shame, which stems from having the knowledge of the clones’ fate, but failing to share it with the other guardians and the students, for their own protection.

Despite the freedom that the guardians have, their privilege has bounds. They could not defer the clones from their fate, for “such a thing would always have been beyond [them] to grant, even at the height of [their] influence” (261). Nothing could alter the fact that the students had to fulfill the duty of organ donation, what they were created to do. The guardians had to live with themselves with the knowledge that, while they tried their best to help the clones, their power was limited and they could not change the clones’ fate. At Hailsham, when students were discussing their ideal lives, Miss Lucy’s shame became evident. Speaking to the students, she ranted, “You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you were created to do” (81). Miss Lucy desired to give the children a deeper understanding, but was unable to. She sought to, but was unable to because the children were desensitized to the truth. The children always knew of their donations; however, they were “told and not told” (82). Unable to help the children, the guardians felt hopelessness, which was manifested through pity. When speaking to Kathy and Tommy, Madame, the woman who sought to prove the humanity of the clones, simpered, “Poor creatures. I wish I could help you” (272). However, while the guardians were in a position of hierarchy that did not have adequate power to make a change the fate of the clones, they were still privileged. Ultimately, the treatment of the clones did not affect the daily lives of the guardians. Even though the clones were being sacrificed and mistreated, the guardians still had enough privilege that allowed them to keep living.

The characters with the ultimate privilege are the general public, who are blissfully unaware of the treatment of the clones. They are common people and, therefore, have the privilege to live, to choose their own paths in life. Unlike the clones, they can dream. If they desired, they could “go to America to stand the best chance” of being actors (81). However, unlike the guardians, the public also has the privilege of ignorance. They do not have to daily wrestle with the decision to kill clones for their own benefit. Instead, they have the ability to condemn the fate of the clones within their ignorance. The general public could choose to not see the souls of the children, to not recognize them as being human, and then to justify the treatment. They were the “world, requiring students to donate” and had the power and ability to force the clones to sacrifice themselves (263). Despite their highest level of privilege, they recognize their shame the least. When Hailsham was first created, they did accept their shame and would donate to improve the conditions of the clones. At the galleries, “cabinet ministers, bishops, all sorts of famous people [came] to attend. There were speeches, large funds pledged...there was a lot of support for our movement back then, the tide was with [Hailsham]” (262). The people at the galleries did this because they saw the souls of the students through their artwork and were ashamed of their poor treatment. However, when the Morningdale scandal hit, the general public that was only indirectly involved with the clones had enough privilege to withdraw from the donation programs and be completely unaffected. Their shame remained: it had become a part of them. However, instead of acknowledging it, the general public ignored it.

Despite the hierarchy within the novel, it is the reader who is most ignorant and yet retains the ultimate privilege. By writing the book as a dialogue, Ishiguro secures the reader as a character within the book. When speaking about collections, Kathy addresses the reader directly: “I don’t know if you had ‘collections’ where you were” (38). This question implies that the

reader is a clone, a character that only exists within the book. However, the reader is not just a character in the book, the reader is between the world of the novel and the world as the reader knows it. Ishiguro forces the reader into the story and integrates the reader as a member of a horrific society that morally justifies the killing of others for its own benefit. Despite being positioned as a clone with whom Kathy is having a conversation, the reader has the ultimate privilege that no one else has: the reader can remove himself or herself from the world of the novel. Unlike the general public within the text, the reader can ignore the issue of clone treatment and simply label this experience of shame as "fiction." However, Ishiguro places the reader in a difficult position. Since Kathy narrates the text and the information of clones and their treatment is divulged, the reader cannot remain ignorant. Instead, the reader is thrust into a position in which the reader is informed, but cannot instigate change within the hierarchy.

Throughout the text, the reader is placed in each position of the hierarchical social chain, yet is not part of the same world as Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy. It is implied that the reader is a clone from another estate. However, despite this placement within a fictional hierarchy, the reader is not a clone. The reader is independent: the reader has agency. Like the guardians, the reader knows of the horrors of cloning, but cannot do anything about it. Finally, the reader is able to fulfill the role of general public, who has ultimate privilege. Before the reading of *Never Let Me Go*, the reader was unaware of the mistreatment of clones that was occurring within the sphere of the novel. The monstrous act of forcing clones to donate organs does not occur when the reader begins the novel; rather, it commences as the reader discovers that, within the narrative, cloning has already occurred for decades. Before reading the book, the reader was ignorant towards the issue, as were the general public. The only role the reader is unable to fulfill is the role of a clone not raised in a privileged estate, which ensures that the reader retains a level

of privilege throughout the novel and is never free from the shame attached to that privilege. Yet, despite these positionings, the reader lives in a separate world, one without such severe moral issues of cloning. Therefore, the reader retains the ultimate privileged position. The reader may encounter firsthand knowledge of the treatment of the clones, but the reader may escape the fictional world of the text and may live a long and full life, released from the shame of privilege.

Throughout the novel, *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro establishes a societal hierarchy that is divided into the categories of clone and human. Within this hierarchy, shame reveals the faults of the structure and places the blame on not just the privileged, but also on anyone who is aware of the disadvantages that come with a social caste system. Each category is subdivided. Clones are categorized into those that lived in deteriorating, government-run dormitories and clones that grew up in upper class estates. Within these hierarchies, the clones from the estates are superior to those that were raised in a government program. Because of their status, the estate clones have a higher level of privilege, superseded only by the guardians and the general public. The guardians carry the burden of the knowledge about the treatment of the clones, but are unable to change the power structures within the society. However, they refuse to accept the feeling of shame because, if they were to embrace this shame, they would be required to accept the humanity of the clones and to be responsible for the treatment of them. Although the public holds the ability to enact change, they remain willfully ignorant of the conditions of the clones. While Miss Lucy accepted shame, all other characters in the novel reject shame, which shapes the interactions between character types and perpetuates the divide between each position found within the hierarchical society. However, while shame divides the hierarchical placement between humans and clones, it connects these positions and establishes the mutually shared core of humanity. Acceptance of shame would require acknowledgement of the clones' humanity;

however, the refusal to accept shame strips the people of their own humanity. To be human is not only to feel, but also to feel for others. It is the role of shame to bind one human to another.

When shame is accepted, the individuals within different levels of societal hierarchies are forced to recognize the humanity of the other. This recognition of others may lead to the erasure of privilege that divides the social strata.

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